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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000828

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: C-AL8-01247: FORMER ARENA CANDIDATE ON AVILA
CAMPAIGN, INCREMENTAL CHANGES IN COENA

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former ARENA presidential candidate Luis Mario Rodriguez told PolCouns July 7. He was guardedly optimistic about the state of (conservative, pro-American) ARENA presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila's campaign. Rodriguez described the key team members currently working on Avila's platform, including Salvadoran Ambassador to the U.S. Rene Leon who is coordinating the process. Rodriguez said that ARENA will seek input from party activists from around the country and that Avila is determined to reshape COENA, ARENA's executive committee. He said that consultants were helping to improve Avila's campaign skills and it was possible that Avila would accept a debate with (leftist) FMLN presidential candidate Funes. Recent polling has Funes ahead by double digits. The presidential election will be held March 15. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PolCouns spoke July 7 with Luis Mario Rodriguez, former candidate for the ARENA presidential nomination and former Legal Advisor to President Saca. Rodriguez described key team members working on the platform (plan de gobierno) for ARENA's presidential candidate, Rodrigo Avila. Salvadoran Ambassador to the U.S. Rene Leon is coordinating the platform development process. Rodriguez is in charge of judicial issues, environment, and labor issues. Rafael Lemus, formerly of FUSADES (a center-right Salvadoran think tank) and who worked in the GOES with former Economic Minister Eduardo Zablah, is responsible for economic issues. Rodrigo Siman is coordinating social issues, including healthcare. Siman is a well regarded physician who has worked on AIDS and HIV prevention issues and is the brother of Ricardo Siman, former Economic Advisor at the GOES Technical Secretariat who is now VP of Roberto Murray Meza's AGRISAL. Former Minister of Justice and Foreign Affairs Oscar Santamaria is working on foreign affairs. Wilma Calderon, president of CoExport, the Salvadoran Exporters Corporation, is handling small and medium enterprise and entrepreneur issues. She was previously VP of Lactosa, a Salvadoran dairy firm and participated in the National Committee for CAFTA negotiations. Monica Villafuerte is in charge of infrastructure issues, including major infrastructure projects and housing.

¶3. (C) Similar to the FMLN, though not quite as extensive a process as described by Rodriguez, ARENA will seek input from party activists from around El Salvador by forming working groups throughout the country. Rodriguez said that Avila wanted to prepare a platform different from previous campaigns, one that was forward-looking and centered on proposals, less focused on party dogma.

¶4. (C) Rodriguez then discussed Avila's ongoing efforts to reshape COENA, ARENA's executive committee. Moving people aside was hard, he said, but Avila was determined to do so in a deliberate way and to build a team within COENA that would work together effectively. Rodriguez said Avila's approach to the campaign would be different from previous campaigns in that rather than focus solely on the candidate, he would

place great emphasis on the entire ARENA team from Avila on down to candidates for the Assembly and local officials.

15. (C) Rodriguez said he believed the coaching done by Avila's Mexican political consultants seemed to be working; he felt Avila was becoming more focused and polished in his public appearances. Rodriguez even said that the question of Avila agreeing to debate Funes was still open and that he personally believed Avila should agree to debate. Funes, he said, has a very shallow command of the issues, which will prove to be a serious weakness if Avila is well prepared. Rodriguez said Avila would appear at a large ARENA rally Sunday, July 13 in the Cuscatlan Stadium. (Note: This is the same venue where the FMLN announced Funes' candidacy. End note.) Rodriguez said that despite Avila's weak polling numbers at present, he believed victory was achievable, though not a sure thing. That said, he continued, the result will be close and ARENA cannot expect to win by double digits as in previous elections. He said ARENA's analysis of some of the polling data in El Salvador was that Funes' numbers were skewed high because of sampling errors. He said that several polls had overweighted traditionally pro-FMLN neighborhoods, towns, and departments thus suggesting a bigger lead for Funes than a properly constructed poll would indicate. Recent polls show Funes with a double-digit lead.

16. (C) Comment: Rodriguez was handicapped during the ARENA candidate selection process in part because he was never an ARENA party activist, though he was a loyal public servant in the Saca Administration. That distance from ARENA's hard core seems to give him a clearer-eyed view of ARENA's and Avila's prospects than many inside and outside ARENA. Rodriguez does not suffer from the despair that has led some in ARENA to call for Avila to be replaced as candidate. Instead, he is focused on bolstering Avila's candidacy and sees eye to eye with Avila on the need to present Avila's candidacy as a team effort with a strong focus on social issues.

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